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Torn Notebook: The Creative Process

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Torn Notebook



THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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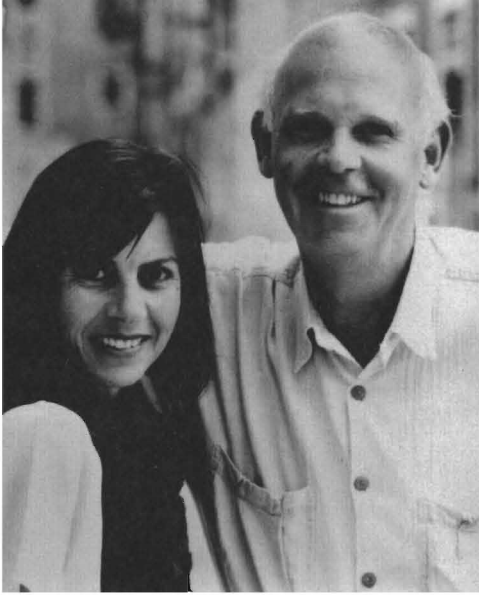
Fifteenth Annual Statewide Exhibition

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
and Sculpture Garden

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Torn Notebook: The Creative Process

2001-02 Sheldon Statewide



Claes Oldenburg
Coosje van Bruggen

Torn Notebook: The Creative Process features twenty artworks related to *Torn Notebook*, a large-scale public sculpture made by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen in 1996 and installed in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska. This exhibition focuses on one of their more recent public sculptures and celebrates the creative process that characterizes all serious artistic endeavors.

The unique artistic collaboration between Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, which began in 1976 with the installation of *Trowel*, a colossal hand tool installed permanently on the grounds of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, The Netherlands, has resulted in more than twenty-eight large-scale public sculpture projects around the world. These large sculptures, which are derived explicitly and unapologetically from everyday objects, are examples of Oldenburg's career-long desire to make art "that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."² Such public sculpture as the *Batcolumn* in Chicago, *Clothespin*, located in Centre Square in Philadelphia, *Shuttlecocks* at the Nelson-

"I am for an art that is political-eretical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum."

Claes Oldenburg, 1961¹

Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, and *Crusoe Umbrella* in Des Moines, Iowa reveal their common interest in the familiar objects of life as worthy of monumental commemoration.

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1929, Oldenburg graduated from Yale University in 1950 after growing up in Chicago. In 1956 he moved to New York, and became involved with a number of other artists who were attempting to break down the barriers, as it were, between "art and life," a phrase that became a mantra for the New York avant-garde throughout the sixties, from Pop artists to Happenings performers and Fluxus, groups with which Oldenburg enjoyed fruitful associations. Oldenburg's first solo exhibition at the Judson Gallery in 1959 consisted of large-scale cardboard cut-outs and drawings hanging from the ceiling and walls, interspersed with his poems and notes.

Oldenburg's interest in language and its relationship to visual imagery emerged while observing graffiti, which had begun to adorn New York City. "These were," as Oldenburg observed, "anonymous messages of experience and survival."³ Oldenburg's fantasy, humor, and ironical wit is evidenced in his famous installation in 1962, called *The Store*. For this piece he recreated the commodities for sale in a typical store, fashioned out of plaster, muslin, and chicken wire, then covered with drips and spatters of bright enamel house paint. In 1961 Oldenburg stated, "what I want to do more than anything is to create things just as mysterious as nature."⁴ In the early sixties, Oldenburg fabricated soft sculptures from vinyl and sewn canvas stuffed with foam rubber and painted with liquitex, depicting sandwiches, hamburgers, ice cream cones,

drum sets, and typewriters. The soft, drooping sculptures provided a stark—and humorous—contrast to the objects to which they refer.

In 1965, Oldenburg initiated a series of drawings of absurd and humorous "colossal monuments" for New York, such as a half-peeled banana, giant ironing board and iron, soft *Good Humor Bar*, and a lipstick intended for London. The latter was ultimately fabricated in America and mounted on tractor treads at Yale University in 1969, thus beginning Oldenburg's interest (in a rather controversial way) in taking his unique aesthetic into the realm of public art. Public art in the U.S. (and throughout the Western tradition) had been characterized by seriousness. Oldenburg and van Bruggen were interested in exploring whether public art could retain its dignity while expressing humor, irony, and light-hearted fun.

Throughout Oldenburg's artistic career, drawing and sketching have played an extremely important part of his aesthetic expression. Oldenburg observed, "Why do I not just present the real thing instead of imitating it? Because my desire to imitate extends to the event or activity of making the thing I imitate."⁵ And this includes the multitude of sketches and plans that Oldenburg creates in the process of finishing a project. Like many artists working in New York in the late fifties and early sixties, art consisted as much in the process or the "act" of making it as the finished object itself. For Oldenburg this process included scavenging for materials, from cardboard and enamel paints and chicken wire to crafting the objects. Although intended to replicate common everyday objects, they reveal the hand of the artist as they are molded, shaped, and painted.



Figure 5: *Untitled* (maquette), painted metal, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Gift of the artist

The professional staff of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is committed to making the exceptional permanent collection available to all Nebraskans. The Sheldon Statewide program realizes that goal by circulating outstanding works of art to communities throughout the state. We appreciate the many local sponsors who support the exhibition in their communities. Their generosity has enabled thousands of fellow citizens to encounter important works of American art. Perhaps the most significant component of this collaborative venture is the effort of many volunteer docents at each venue. Their willingness to receive information and disseminate it to the schoolchildren and adults of Nebraska is the vital link that connects the Sheldon staff, the supporters, and viewers of each statewide exhibition.

Cover: *Notebook Torn in Half*, 1997, color lithograph, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection, 1997.H-3093

Oldenburg and van Bruggen met in 1970 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where van Bruggen had been on staff since 1967. They worked together on the *Trowel* and married in 1977. An art historian, curator, and a poet, van Bruggen has written scholarly monographs on conceptual artist Bruce Naumann and architect Frank Gehry. Although Oldenburg had created mock proposals for colossal public monuments throughout the sixties, his collaboration with van Bruggen has focused on transforming these proposals into functional monuments to life. Oldenburg's own interest in written language has intensified through van Bruggen's poetic imagination, which has been an important contribution to this collaboration.

Torn Notebook (1996) is one of the artists' finest public commissions. Consisting of an eighteen-foot high spiral ring notebook and two torn pages in aluminum and steel, tumbling away in a gust of wind, *Torn Notebook* was a commission by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden that lasted nearly four years and included several visits to Lincoln by the artists. Its blend of abstract and representational qualities has insured a wide and diverse audience as it offers a dramatic transition from downtown Lincoln to the University of Nebraska campus, aesthetically reaffirming the close relationship between "town" and "gown," the University and the community. Not only does the subject acknowledge its academic surroundings, it also speaks to the artists' working processes, and is thus autobiographical in nature. Both Oldenburg



Figure 1: Claes and Coosje at Tallix Foundry



Figure 2: *Store Window: Bow, Hats, Heart, Shirt, 29¢*, 1973, color lithograph, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection, 1976.H-2222

and van Bruggen carry small spiral notebooks while they travel to potential project sites, collecting ideas, notes, impressions, and sketches to assist in developing their ideas. And it is these notebooks, the artists' notebooks, to which *Torn Notebook* refers, reflecting the personal aspect of this very public work of art. The writings covering the aluminum pages are taken directly from the artists' notebooks, and "written" in their own hand.

Although *Torn Notebook* is about the artists' interaction with Nebraska, it is also emblematic of the creative process, which began in earnest in 1992 with Oldenburg's initial visit to Lincoln. (Former Sheldon Art Gallery director George W. Neubert had contacted the artists about a possible commission six years earlier.) After the Sheldon Advisory Board approved a study and maquette, a contract was drawn to develop a large-scale sculpture proposal. In 1993 Oldenburg and van Bruggen visited Lincoln to explore ideas for the subject and potential locations of sculpture. Oldenburg and van Bruggen's initial ideas consisted of footballs, popcorn and corn cobs, coffee cups, covered wagons, roller skates, the state Capitol, and other state icons. In 1994 the final maquette was presented and approved. For the next two years, the artists engaged in numerous discussions with and presentations to University administrators and civic leaders.

Although it is representational, *Torn Notebook* is also highly symbolic and abstract, expressing the artists' associations—sometimes obscure associations—with the state. The notebook

itself, playfully being tossed about by the wind, alludes to the frolicking ducks, birds, cranes, and geese that impacted the artists on visits to Nebraska. In addition, the notebook pages reveal fragments of notes recording their observations. For example, one of the upright pages, written in van Bruggen's hand, reads:

Wind clouds
straws in
the sand

In preparation for her visit to Nebraska, van Bruggen read Willa Cather novels. Her observations emerge from her own experience translated through the lens of Cather's prosaic descriptions of the Plains. The other page, in Oldenburg's hand and characteristic of his interest in making obscure connections, reads:

barbed
wire
L-bow

Such notes range from the more obviously descriptive "wind," "clouds," and "barbed wire," which are all quite prevalent in the Plains to the obscure "L-bow," which refers to the sharp angle of the elbow of *The Sower* atop the State Capitol and caught the eye of the artists. Moreover, written language has and continues to be both aesthetic and symbolic. Despite if the words are legible, they take on a lyrical beauty of their own and function as symbolic markers of personal experience.

Words such as "Pop Art," "Ulysses Fire

Department,” “Roller Skate” (from a lunch at Lincoln’s Rock ‘n Roll Runza and Lincoln’s National Museum of Roller Skating), and “Canadensis” (Canadian goose) are visible. The form of the sculptural components also refers to the artists’ interaction with their geographical environment. The spiral binding alludes to the path a tornado takes as it winds across the Plains. Numerous sketches in this exhibition reveal the diverse ideas the artists investigated, ideas that addressed state identity. Images of roller skates; coffee cups and covered wagons; the State Capitol and, in particular, the sower; popcorn and corn plants; and football reveal the variety of visual ideas and poetic associations the artists made to achieve connections. Moreover, this exhibition reveals that an artist’s creative process often consists of abandoned ideas, ideas that are nonetheless an important part of the working process.

In addition, the maquettes, or three-dimensional “studies,” reveal the processes of transforming a drawing into a sculptural study and then into the final work, which was ultimately fabricated by engineers at Tallix, a steel foundry specializing in fine art sculpture, in Beacon, New York (fig. 1). Moreover, the sculpture was conceived by Oldenburg and van Bruggen to sway gently in the wind. Therefore its material had to be strong enough to withstand weather but flexible enough to move. After being fabricated and assembled at the foundry, the complex three-part sculpture was taken apart and shipped to Lincoln where it was

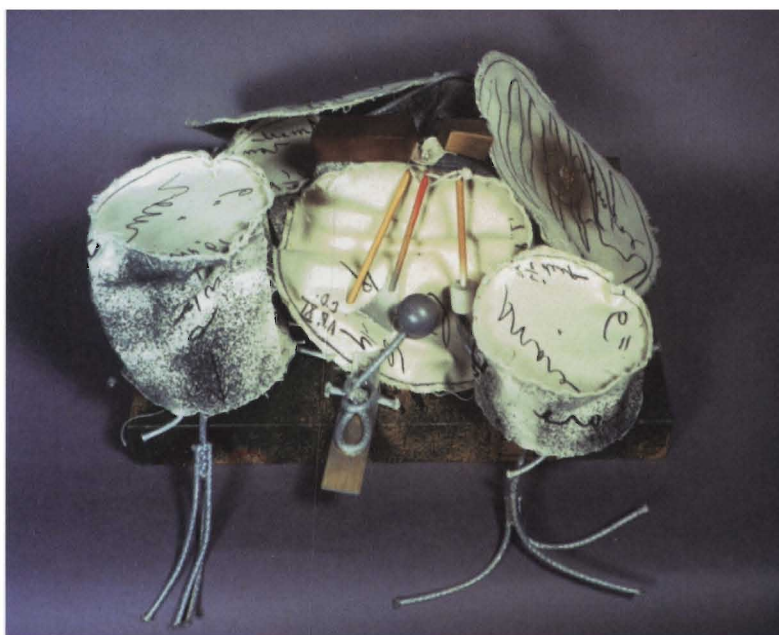


Figure 3: *Soft Drum Set*, 1969, silkscreen on canvas, wood, cord and acrylic, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Olga N. Sheldon Collection, 1985.U-3743

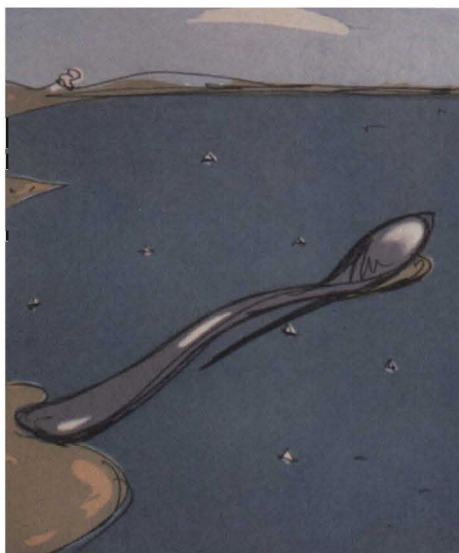


Figure 4: *Spoon Pier*, 1975, color etching, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection, 1977.H-2200

reassembled by the Tallix staff.

Installed where the University and the city “meet,” *Torn Notebook* suggests the civic and public function of education, symbolized by the notebook, and the important role education plays outside the confines of the Ivory Tower. In addition to the important role and responsibility that education plays in the civic arena, *Torn Notebook* also speaks to art’s important role in both education and public life.

There is a popular view that modern art expresses carelessness, laziness, technical deficiencies, and an “anything goes”

attitude. But Oldenburg’s own working process since the late fifties contradicts this assumption. A talented draftsman, drawings and sketches play an important role in the making of his sculptures, whether small-scale objects or colossal public monuments. *Store Window: Bow, Hats, Heart, Shirt*, 29¢, 1973 (fig. 2) and a 1972 lithograph entitled *Soft Drum Set* (fig. 3), which return to the themes he first investigated in the early sixties, reveal Oldenburg’s ability to render likeness with an economy of graceful lines. Sketches, preparatory drawings, and notes play an important role for Oldenburg in working out the implications of an idea. This interest is evident in sketches for his and van Bruggen’s public commissions, for example, *Spoon Pier*, 1975 (fig. 4) a print derived from their commission for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Their public commissions emerge only through the intense and elaborate process of working through ideas in countless sketches, plans, and small-scale sculpture studies. *Torn Notebook: The Creative Process* examines the long and winding road that Oldenburg and van Bruggen traveled to reach the finished work of art, a road that not only consisted of their engagement with the Plains but also includes their own aesthetic development. The theme of the notebook had interested them at least since the late eighties when they began work on a museum installation in Paris entitled *The Entropic Library*. It consisted of a giant row of disintegrating books flanked by teetering bookends. Torn pages strewn on the ground with virtually illegible writing in Oldenburg’s hand were hidden behind other books. Commissioned for an international art exhibition, *The Entropic Library* focuses attention on the tragic consequences of “book learning” and the ephemeral nature of written knowledge. In *Torn Notebook*, Oldenburg and van Bruggen transform the notebook theme into a celebration of learning as a necessary component to public life.

Daniel Siedell
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¹“Statement,” 1961 in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 96.

²Ibid.

³Quoted in *ibid.*, 476.

⁴Quoted in *ibid.*, 155.

⁵Quoted in *ibid.*, 120.

Torn Notebook: The Creative Process

2001-2002 Sheldon Statewide Program Schedule

Alliance	August 26 - September 30, 2001 , Carnegie Arts Center Local Sponsor: Carnegie Arts Center
North Platte	October 2 - October 26, 2001, The Mall Local Sponsors: NebraskaLand National Bank; North Platte Telegraph; Ross Perry Motors and Crossroads Dodge, Cadillac, Oldsmobile, Dodge, Jeep & Eagle; United Nebraska Bank; Wells Fargo Bank; First Federal Lincoln Bank
Grand Island	October 28 - November 30, 2001, Edith Abbott Memorial Library Local Sponsors: Home Federal; Grand Island Public Schools
McCook	December 2 - December 28, 2001, Museum of the High Plains Local Sponsor: McCook Arts Council
Aurora	December 30, 2001 - January 25, 2002, Alice M. Farr Library Local Sponsor: Hamilton Community Foundation, Inc.
Holdrege	January 27 - March 1, 2002, Holdrege Public Library Local Sponsors: Dr. and Mrs. Stuart Embury; Dr. and Mrs. Wayne Quincy; Dr. and Mrs. Doak Doolittle; First National Bank of Holdrege; Holdrege School Foundation; National Art Honor Society, Holdrege Chapter
Beatrice	March 4 - March 29, 2002, Gage County Museum Local Sponsor: Beatrice National Bank & Trust Co.
Columbus	March 31 - April 26, 2002, Columbus Art Gallery Local Sponsor: Kirkpatrick Pettis
Fremont	April 28 - May 24, 2002, Fremont Area Art Association Local Sponsor: Fremont Area Art Association
Cozad	May 26 - July 12, 2002, Robert Henri Museum & Historical Walkway Local Sponsors: Cozad Arts Council; Friends of the Henri; Marilyn and Bill Cozad
Hastings	July 14 - August 30, 2002, The Hastings Museum Local Sponsor: The Hastings Museum of Natural and Cultural History
York	September 3 - September 27, 2002, Cornerstone Bank Local Sponsor: Cornerstone Bank
Norfolk	September 29 - November 1, 2002, Norfolk Arts Center Local Sponsor: Norfolk Arts Center



Sheldon Statewide is supported in part by the Nebraska Art Association and through a donation by James and Rhonda Seacrest. The Nebraska Art Association is a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to advancing the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and enrichment opportunities. Nebraska Art Association programs are supported in part by a Basic Support Grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, a State agency. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a Federal Agency that fosters innovation, leadership and a lifetime of learning, supports the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.